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BLOCK CLUBS AND SOCIAL ACTION: A  
CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY CONFLICT

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A "Block Club" may be defined as a group of citizens in a neighborhood who get together and work together to improve their neighborhood. Kahn defines "block organizing as a highly manageable technique, usually "an urban technique" (1970:36). In this context, "organizing may be viewed as a means of achieving and guiding local control over problems that originate elsewhere in society" (Ecklein & Lauffer 1972:11). whereas services focus on individual needs, organizing focuses on the location of common problems and joint efforts aimed at their solution. Community organizers have generally used a natural leader-informal association approach to organizing Block Clubs and their main concern seems to be the enhancement of social relationships in order to bring about a greater capacity on the part of some target population to deal with common problems.

This article illustrates the dilemmas, contradictions and tensions underlying the work of Block Clubs in a neighborhood during 1970-71; a neighborhood in which the residents felt completely powerless to deal with the consequences of a neighborhood bar. The Community Organization effort initiated with the assistance of the author resulted in the closure of the neighborhood bar. The material for this article was developed from the author's personal knowledge.

NEIGHBORHOOD CAFE: A Community Problem.

The history of the problem, as reported by various residents and home owners within the community, begins when Mr. G, a first generation immigrant, opened a tavern around 1940 in the residential section of the neighborhood. It was a family owned business where neighbors would gather to drink beer, talk and relax. Within one

year it became a popular, busy spot in the neighborhood and so, in 1941, the tavern was remodelled. During World War II a large number of people seeking employment came to work for the companies within the city and many of these people established their residence in this neighborhood. This influx of new residents changed the hitherto neighborhood character of the cafe, weakening its community roots. The social control within the cafe itself, previously maintained by the community members, became lax, resulting in an increasing number of fights in the bar. Affluent residents soon began to abandon the neighborhood which was followed by deteriorating public services and a chain reaction of events ultimately helped foster slum conditions in the neighborhood.

Mr. G decided to retire and his son took over the management of the bar. The fights did not stop. The bar's notoriety became known to the entire city and the residents began to hear the familiar question: "How can you live in that dangerous neighborhood?" Taxi drivers often refused to take passengers to and from the neighborhood and the servicemen showed reluctance to come into the neighborhood at late hours. Mr. G's son seems to have managed the bar for several years and then suddenly decided to lease it. Mr. C and Mr. M leased the business jointly in the mid-sixties at a time when the bar clientele included people not only from neighboring cities but also from far away states. A few neighborhood residents still continued to patronize the bar; however, most residents were afraid to even visit the bar.

Fuller and Myers define a social problem as "a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as deviation from some social norm which they cherish" (in Rainwater 1974:1). Such a condition characterized the response of residents in early 1970 when they were asked to comment about the neighborhood problems. The cafe was their immediate and primary concern but they were very reluctant to discuss any possible solutions to the problem. The presence of the bar had created danger to life and property; drugs appeared to be in plentiful supply; women did not pass the adjacent

streets alone; no one walked in the neighborhood after dark. Bar patrons parked cars on both sides of the streets, in spite of the NO PARKING signs, and the street corner near the cafe became a hazard to traffic.

When the problem was discussed it was done in whispers as most people believed that their views might be reported to the bar patrons. Neighbors felt that the very presence of dangerous men in the bar was reason enough to keep quiet. A great deal of neighborhood life involved the planning for defense against these various dangers. The first line of defense, of course, is the home. There was a desire to keep the house isolable from its immediate surroundings; at the most basic level it was essential to have a door lock that worked. One of the frequent responses to the increasing crime in the neighborhood was to "watch over each other" and "not open your doors to strangers".

#### ORGANIZING: The beginnings.

The Community Organizer encouraged the community to bring the problem into the open by actually making it possible to talk about the cafe with residents in small groups. People began expressing their feelings openly and were surprised to find that they were not getting hurt. In fact, the cafe soon became the only topic for discussion whenever residents got together. It also provided an opportunity for the residents to vent their bottled-up feelings and thereby relax. They began to look seriously at the following options:

- (a) Should the bar be closed?
- (b) Should the bar manager be told to maintain his business properly?
- (c) Should the State Liquor License Board be approached about revoking the license of the bar?

The community struggled with the formulation of a workable strategy. Consideration of whether to use conflict or consensus figured largely in designing a strategy. Most of the residents seemed to react negatively to the idea of precipitating violent action; instead they favored discussing the problem with the bar manager.

The residents felt that the bar manager would be hostile to their decision to close the bar and/or request the State Liquor Board to revoke the bar license.

The residents decided to invite the bar manager to meet with the presidents of six block clubs from the general area around the bar. The presence of the area councilman was felt to be necessary in order that he could hear the community's view and answer questions. Mr. B, a local church usher and a home owner in the neighborhood, compiled a list of cafe related crimes and reported that killings, shootings, assaults, and stabbings inside and outside the bar seemed to be the most common crimes.

Nothing was done with the study for some time. A previously scheduled block club sponsored training program kept the issue alive by providing a forum for exchange of ideas among the participants who represented six blocks in the neighborhood. The cafe was frequently discussed, and the pressures for taking action grew each time participants met. Many began openly talking of conflict as a strategy. The most obvious argument in support of conflict for organizing the community and for accelerating the pace of social change was that it usually works (Schaller 1970:172). While many residents criticized the means and others objected to the ends, none denied that the use of conflict would cause neighbors to rally to the cause and that it would hasten change.

The majority among conflict strategists seemed to be in favor of a more visible, open, and active conflict. Although their views were not taken seriously, they did succeed in forcing the leadership to take action. It was decided that the first step would be to write a letter to the bar manager asking him to come to a meeting with the community leaders. Reverend W, a non-practicing minister in his seventies who had lived in the neighborhood for 40 years, volunteered to draft the letter for approval and to have it signed by all six block club presidents. No "one" president would therefore be exposed to the anticipated hostility of the bar manager. No one expressed it publicly, but there was fear in the

hearts of the neighborhood people. Everyone felt more secure in a joint approach; but even with the joint signatures, some neighbors felt that the presidents were doing a great service and had shown a high regard for general community welfare at a considerable personal risk.

Discussions about the cafe became a rallying point for the community to organize and a council of block club presidents was formed. In its desire to do something good for the community, this council discussed the cafe at its very first meeting and deputed Mr. B, one of its members, to hand deliver the letter of invitation to the bar management. This action produced shock waves throughout the community and almost everyone in the neighborhood got involved in debating the issue. An apprehensive group predicted that the management would ignore the letter. A sizable number of residents believed that bringing the cafe problem into the open would create new problems. A third group of residents were terrified to the point of obsession, believing that annoyed patrons of the bar would harm the neighbors.

During these "action filled days" residents kept each other informed through telephone calls and created a state of an undeclared, revengeful, fight between an undefined group of bar patrons and the community. Once the issue began to be analyzed another issue was born. It was argued that the problems in and around the cafe were not peculiar inasmuch as other bars in the city had similar problems. Why, then, single out a local business for liquidation and force people to pay out-siders for drinks? The council leadership did not address itself directly to this issue but adopted a "wait and see" attitude, hoping that the meeting with the bar manager might be fruitful so that the bar could operate as a legitimate business in the community.

#### CONFRONTATION: Meeting with the bar manager.

A special neighborhood meeting with the bar manager was scheduled in the Community House. The leader of the neighborhood group was a factory worker in his sixties who was about to retire. The only women of the

group worked for the County Children Services board. The other members of the group included the non-practicing clergyman, an unskilled laborer (who had recently renovated his home and was very proud of it), a retired company worker (who spoke of himself as a church man and a family man), and a younger person in his forties (who was working in a factory).

The woman member formally greeted the bar manager and thanked him for coming to meet with the group. There was a brief pause and then the manager spoke. He indicated that he was in favor of maintaining peace and a proper atmosphere in the neighborhood. He also stated that he had done everything possible to run a decent business. However, he insisted that he had no control over his clientele and did not have the necessary police protection. He surprised the group by informing them that he kept a gun for his own safety. To the apparent disbelief of group members present, he also informed them that he was willing to move out of the neighborhood if he could secure a suitable place elsewhere. In the meantime he promised to take all necessary steps to keep to area clean and to try to prevent any incidents in and around his business.

The general reaction of the group members was very favorable toward the manager. The discussion that followed was directed toward the councilman who was present throughout the discussion. The group wanted to know why this neighborhood was not getting the degree of police protection that would ensure safety to the neighborhood. Members also felt strongly that the city should fulfill its responsibility to provide such essentials as trash receptacles on the street corners and near the bar so that the surrounding area could be kept reasonable clean.

As a result of this meeting community representatives tentatively accepted the bar manager's description of his position as accurate. A more responsive and responsible role by the councilman and other city officials was desired. The meeting helped the group recognize the need to meet with police officials and discuss with them the lack of police protection and the increasing amount of serious crime in the community. The confrontation

meeting became a creative force. The council leadership was more confident of itself and pleased to discover that the bar manager was himself a victim of running a business in an area where the neighborhood was suffering from deprivation of services.

MEETING WITH THE POLICE: A conflict ends without resolution.

Saul Alinsky of the Industrial Areas Foundation argues that "controversy has always been the seed of creation" (in Rose 1964:145). He insists that the use of conflict can be justified, not only because it works, but also because it provides the most fertile ground for creative thinking.

Conditions seemed to improve in and around the bar and the general feeling was that the bar managers were demonstrating their genuine interest in running a good neighborhood business. However, feelings against the councilman ran high. To the neighborhood residents he represented the city's power structure. "The structure" Hunter wrote, "is that of a dominant policy-making group using the machinery of government as a bureaucracy for the attainment of certain goals coordinate with the interests of the policy making group" (1953:102). The councilman stated that it was his duty to do what a broad section of the community wanted him to do. In actuality, he was not taking any meaningful steps that would have demonstrated his concern for the neighborhood and its improvement.

Community leaders pursued aggressively for a meeting with police officers. The council leadership believed that there could be no effective reduction of bar related incidents unless these issues were addressed openly and honestly with the police. Policemen and members of the community are remote from one another, and fear and hostility exist on both sides. The police represent what they perceive to be legitimate authority, while the community all too frequently perceives this authority to be misused at the very least, or illegitimate, erratic, and oppressive at the worst.

The police officers did not seem enthusiastic about



coming to the neighborhood to meet with the community leaders. However, a meeting date was mutually agreed upon and the residents were invited to meet with the police officers in the downtown safety building. The community leaders accepted the invitation and appointed a general committee in preparation for the meeting. Each block club was encouraged to select a minimum of 5 residents for the meeting and arrange for their transportation to downtown.

On the meeting day the residents assembled in a big hall of the safety building. The hall had comfortable chairs and the residents took seats as they came in. Three police officers arrived. The senior officer positioned himself on a raised platform and welcomed the audience. The other two officers stood on either side of him. The senior police officer spoke at length and used a lot of statistical information to explain the crime situation in the city. He also described and highlighted the problems that police officers face in the discharge of their duties.

This audience was perhaps different from most of the audiences the police officers had handled. Primarily, this was a group of well organized, concerned residents who were not here only to complain, but also to demand decisive action be taken in relation to their complaints. The police officers were apparently surprised and seemed reluctant to tackle a group of citizens who were not "angry" in the usual sense of the term. This proved to be rather unfortunate.

After hearing a long lecture, the neighbors expressed their willingness to report and even help in identifying any undesirable activity in the neighborhood. Surprisingly, the police officers did not utilize this opportunity to work out a joint program of fighting crime in the neighborhood. Their main concern seemed to be in highlighting problems and obstacles of police work due to the techniques of sophisticated criminals.

Most of the residents liked the idea of sitting down with the police officers and also appreciated

their willingness to hear what the community had to say; however, they were dissatisfied with the outcome of the meeting. One condition of the meeting that particularly annoyed the residents was the seating arrangements in the hall. The whole idea of turning the hall into a classroom where the presiding officer took it upon himself to address the audience seemed unnecessary. The community representatives felt that the meeting would have been more informal and much more would have been accomplished in a "roundtable" type of atmosphere.

Nonetheless, it was felt that everything was not in vain. The community very ably demonstrated the lack of adequate police protection in their neighborhood and secured the number of police cars assigned to patrol the neighborhood. The audience also got an assurance that the police patrol in the area would be increased if necessary. The cafe came into sharp focus for the first time; at least a beginning in communications was made.

TRAGEDY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:  
Change process is speeded up.

CS, a resident of the neighborhood, fatally shot JS at the cafe and the community was horrified. Those sections of the community who would have let the cafe remain undisturbed reassessed their own thinking. Out of this tragedy came an uneasy understanding: SOMETHING MUST BE DONE TO STOP THESE SENSELESS KILLINGS!

As a result of this unfortunate incident, the W Street Block Club took the initiative and convened a special meeting; an open discussion followed the treasurer's report. The lack of police protection and the cafe problem were discussed at length. It was decided by the group that in cooperation with other block clubs in the neighborhood, steps would be taken to close the bar.

For the first time, a group of residents directly affected by the problem (the street being very close to the bar) had come up with a clear-cut decision. In

pursuance of this important decision, Mrs. L attended the adjacent street's block club meeting as a guest and received overwhelming support for the decision to close the bar.

The new leaders took another important step; they encouraged the local newspaper to write about cafe related problems in the neighborhood. Consequently, a story was published in the Sunday magazine and the cafe problem reached practically everyone in the larger community. People from all walks of life and from all parts of the city called for further information and many people offered help. This further created an atmosphere of hope and the residents began to feel that they were not alone in this matter.

The councilman immediately informed the community leaders that a city official had been deputed to investigate and report on the possibility of revoking the license of the bar.

COUNCIL MOVES DECISIVELY: Close the bar.

The council of block club presidents met to assess the situation. Residents of two streets appeared before the community council, pleaded for immediate action, and promised their full support. The council deliberated at length and finally decided to proceed to close the bar. Reverend W was authorized to meet with the Director of the Board of Elections to explore the possibility of getting the issue on the November ballot as a local option. Legally, residents of the precinct in question and one adjoining precinct can decide whether beer or liquor can be sold by the glass in the precinct provided that:

- (a) 15 percent of the registered voters sign a petition from the precinct where the bar is located.
- (b) 15 percent of the registered voters sign from the adjacent precinct.

The petitions thus signed must be notarized and submitted 90 days before the general election. The Board of Elections review the petitions and if they are in order the issue is placed on the ballot as a local option.

The council leadership accepted the challenge and planned their actions very carefully. A person to person, decentralized campaign was agreed upon. The petitions were distributed among six presidents who undertook the responsibility to contact and canvass the registered voters on their streets. It turned out to be a superb organizational effort. Three streets alone had the requisite number of signatures.

At their regular meeting, the Board of Elections reviewed and approved the petition and the council of block club presidents was informed. This news was received with joy and enthusiasm. For the first time, perhaps, the residents felt that they had some control over their neighborhood and its condition. The residents also felt that they now had at least some control over the value of their property, which was, after all, their biggest investment.

LOCAL BUSINESSES MEET: Interest  
groups threaten the outcome.

As the sample ballots became available, the community took a closer look. It became apparent that there were three grocery stores, a club, and two neighborhood bars selling and serving beer and liquor within the community. The club and two bars would have to close if the voters decided to vote the two precincts dry. The three stores would suffer heavy economic loss. Up until this realization, the political and economic elite of the neighborhood did not seem to be concerned about the problems created by the cafe. Now, however, they became very actively interested. They met and decided to organize a counter-offensive. Money for this objective was of course no problem.

A political party candidate running for election in the neighborhood associated himself completely with this private interest group. A deal was suggested: the local neighborhood businessmen would meet with the cafe manager and pressure him to keep his business under control and the candidate for city council would use his influence for immediate action if the cafe continued to remain a problem. In return the issue was to be defeated at the polls. The businessmen promised

that they would get involved and support neighborhood programs. A section of the community leadership was convinced and accepted the deal. "We are against the cafe and not all the businesses" became their slogan. The voters were encouraged to defeat the issue at the polls.

A few concerned residents did not accept this deal; instead they got together and intensified their own campaign. A door to door, person to person, friend to friend, neighbor to neighbor contact was established. "This is our only chance" became their slogan. Voting was very heavy at the polls, but the community decided to close the cafe by a small margin. The long history of the cafe ended in early 1972 when the managers closed the doors for good.

#### SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The foregoing account has policy implications for (a) those planning social action at the local level; (b) individuals and businesses with interests in inner-city areas; (c) planners and legislators at local and state levels; (d) social service agencies in inner-city areas; and (e) those interested in better police-community relations. Such policy implications are summarized as follows:

- (a) Policy issues for those planning social action at the local level: Continued social-ability, coupled with lack of long term ideological commitment, tends to weaken the progress of groups that undertake social action. Groups planning such action may perhaps see early progress if they seek expert advice, discourage excessive socializing and encourage ideological commitment.
- (b) Policy issues for individuals and businesses in inner-city areas: Those with interests in inner-city areas may face social action there as soon as leadership for such action develops. The demands of such leadership are likely to be for community control. Sudden changes may have harmful effects on local resources. Solicitation for funding from and

- joint planning with local, state and federal levels of government may help in peaceful transition. Also, elected officials from the area should be involved by the local leadership in such aggressive solicitation.
- (c) Policy issues for planners and legislators: New legislation may be necessary to allocate suitable sites for bars outside residential areas. The existing laws concerning the closing of neighborhood bars need to be changed so that neighborhood resident's action against trouble spots need not be cumbersome or too inclusive.
  - (d) Policy issues for social service agencies in inner-city areas: Social service agencies in inner-cities have traditionally depended on middle and upper income groups for leadership and resources. Citizen groups committed to peaceful change in neighborhoods may provide the future leadership of these agencies and as partners they can be helpful in changing the middle class image of the agencies.
  - (e) Policy issues for police: The popular view is widespread that crime can be reduced if only more police are put on the streets. Preventive patrol, for so long the fundamental police strategy, means having officers walk or drive through their beats whenever they are not answering a specific call for service or assistance. Their continuous, moving presence, the theory goes, will deter crime. Recent studies have indicated that this is not necessarily true. "Community service" approach strategy is suggested to replace patrol strategy in inner-city areas. It is based on the assumption that if officers become familiar with the neighborhoods in which they work, and if they take larger responsibilities for following through on requests for assistance as well as complaints of crime, they will win the people's confidence and elicit their cooperation in solving or preventing crime.

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